

## **Contribution to the PAMEB discussion on January 14, 2002**

**By Iain Davidson-Hunt**

Since I was not able to access the website today I have combined this message with attached documents that might be of interest.

I have been following the discussion, including the discussion papers, and have found it to be extremely relevant in light of my theoretical and applied research with local communities regarding plant knowledge. The only comment I might make at this time, since I don't think it has been covered, is that we need to move beyond seeing local communities as sources of information to partners in the production of knowledge about biodiversity. It is possible my comments may be more appropriate to other themes. If so, sorry for jumping the gun.

Learning processes, instead of knowledge products, gets us beyond some of the instrumental questions regarding ethnobotanical classification and moving toward current insights regarding knowledge systems and environmental perception. I would recommend Fikret Berkes's 1999 book on Sacred Ecology and Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Tim Ingold's 2000 book on Environmental Perception as being relevant to that concern. I would guess that many local peoples would be shocked to think that their classification system represented the sum of their values and/or interests in the specific plants and landscapes of their territories.

The work of Fikret Berkes, myself and other colleagues here in Canada, along with our partners from local communities, has been to move away from one way flows of information toward sharing of knowledge and mutual learning. This does not mean that we don't pay attention to some of the methodological issues regarding ethnobiology (as put forth by a number of discussants and the set of three excellent papers by Wong and colleagues). These are obviously a big part of the discussion. However, by recognising that different cultures are coming into contact we put much more emphasis on how the actors of these different cultures are going to communicate and move toward mutual learning about specific problems in specific places. Classification sometimes acts as a useful communication tool, especially when we are talking about plant diversity, but is only an entry point into mutual learning. In many cases we have often found that local peoples are either interested in, or need to produce, scientific information. I have not worked in any community to date, from Mexico to Canada, where local peoples do not want their young people to learn "scientific" approaches to data collection. This does not then mean that they will favour "scientific" information over their own perceptions of what is occurring at a species or landscape level. It does mean that at times they will incorporate some of this information into their own system of knowledge although we may not recognize the source of that knowledge once it has been incorporated. Mutual learning is key as many local peoples with whom we work insist that research interpretation and management decisions be reached through a process of negotiation and consensus. While I would say that those of us who work with local knowledge in Canada are moving toward this approach it is still difficult to implement in management practice.

In case you are interested in more detail I am attaching a few documents which provide some conceptual background to these comments. Three of the documents are more conceptual while one outlines the details of how a research project examining plant diversity with a local community was structured. The latter is a technical report of a project which was in the works so please feel free to read but not to cite. I would also direct you to <http://ncrs.fs.fed.us/pubs/> where you can find NC GTR 217.

The chapters by Davidson-Hunt, Duchesne and Zasada, Chapeskie, and Davidson-Hunt and Berkes may be of interest to this discussion. While we have a pretty good idea of where the locus for different sales of

management should be located, see <http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/MNR/nbi/> for an example of public policy, and the responsibility of different scales, we are finding that it is not communication among scales that is difficult but communication amongst the different cultures that provides real challenges. Scientists working for the local community, or local community members collecting information as part of a scientific methodology, can usually communicate with provincial, conservation and federal organisations quite effectively. In this case there is a shared culture. Researchers, or local community members, responsible to try and present local knowledge in a manner that makes sense to provincial, conservation and federal organisations and vice versa face quite a challenge. While the methodologies are often quite complicated, the products are often quite simple: maps which denote locations of interest in single species, aboriginal cultural landscapes which usually embed a variety of different values, critical habitats for animals. We also do spend a lot of time on ethnobotanical classification so we know that we are, more or less, talking about the same classes of biodiversity. I guess, in sum, I would argue that both local peoples and biodiversity will benefit from committed scientists, local peoples and the potential synergy of their knowledge. However, place-specific and equitable research partnerships and decision-making institutions will need to be invented if this is to occur. While it may not be necessary to extricate local knowledge for use in higher scales of decision-making, it is very important that place-based peoples are provided with contemporary opportunities to keep their knowledge of biodiversity in the bush and not in the museums.